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ABSTRACT

In an effort to increase access to education and set up a comprehensive qualification framework, Hong Kong's Education Commission made key recommendations to the government in May 2000. Those recommendations included the development of a diversified, multi-channel, multi-layer higher education system. Three of Hong Kong's higher education institutions launched the Associate Degree (AD) program, loosely modeled on the United States and Canadian Associate of Arts degree programs. The AD program in Hong Kong should serve to develop a more diversified higher education structure and fulfill the need for a more highly educated workforce. A 60% increase in enrollment is a planning target--a total additional postsecondary enrollment of 82,400. The AD program structure requires 450 contact hours in a 2-year curriculum. Twenty percent of the AD curriculum should include non-specialized general education in those programs that are highly specialized. For other less specialized disciplines, the general education proportion should be closer to 40%. AD graduates should possess a solid foundation of generic skills, including Chinese and English languages, basic information technology applications, and interpersonal, communications, quantitative, and analytic skills. (Contains 23 references.) (NB)

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The Associate Degree in Hong Kong

Final Report of
a Consultancy Study
commissioned by the
Education and Manpower Bureau
and undertaken by the Federation
for Continuing Education in
Tertiary Institutions

ED 459 891

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Executive Summary

The objective of the present study is to elucidate the meaning of the Associate Degree (AD), and its position in the education system of Hong Kong.

To this end, an overview was first undertaken on the AD programmes currently offered in other countries and regions.

This was followed by a stock-taking exercise of all the AD programmes currently offered and to be launched in Hong Kong.

A set of common descriptors is then developed. This includes, *inter alia*,

(1) programme objectives, (2) entry requirements, (3) programme structure, (4) curriculum design, (5) learning outcomes, (6) teacher qualifications, (7) quality assurance, (8) exit qualifications, (9) progression and articulation routes etc.

In essence, it is suggested that the AD progamme - when taken in the full-time mode - should be a two-year programme open to Secondary 6 students. Graduates of the programme should be able to articulate to the second year of the local 3-year degree programmes, or the third year of the 4-year overseas degree programmes. As an exit qualification for employment purposes, the level of AD should be considered as equivalent to that of the Higher Diploma.

As a progression pathway to the AD programme, especially for students who cannot progress to S.6/7 studies, it is proposed that a Higher Education Foundation Certificate (HEFC) programme be introduced. This 1-year full-time programme will be open to S.5 graduates as well as graduates of the Springboard Programme. A basic description of this HEFC is offered in the present study.

Finally, specific recommendations are made for the consideration of the government, especially with regard to the need for quality assurance on the one hand, and the need for official recognition (particularly in terms of civil service recruitment) on the other.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Policy Background

In the Policy Address delivered in October 2000, Chief Executive Mr. Tung Chee-hwa announced the goal of increasing the tertiary education opportunities for people of the relevant age cohort **from the current 30% to a target of 60% within a period of ten years**. According to a paper submitted by the Education and Manpower Bureau to the Legislative Council Panel on Education in May 2001, 60% is only a planning target. The pace of development will depend on actual demand and supply of post-secondary places. These new places will primarily be **self-financing**. Translated into actual numbers, this means an **additional 30,600 first-year** post-secondary places or **total additional enrolment of about 82,400.** The Government will facilitate tertiary institutions, private enterprises and other organisations to provide options other than traditional sixth form education, such as professional diploma courses, higher diploma courses and associate degree programmes.

Meanwhile, the Government has accepted the key recommendations of the Education Commission made in May 2000, which were made after a comprehensive review of the entire education system. One of the main objectives is to develop a **diversified, multi-channel, multi-layer higher education system**. A key component of this system is a "flexible and transferable credit unit system" (section 8.4.6 & 8.4.30 of the Education Commission Final Report, May 2000), the prerequisite of which is a comprehensive qualifications framework in which "qualifications are mutually recognised and transferable among various continuing education/formal education/ professional/vocational training programmes" (section 8.5.7 & 8.5.8).

In short, the **widening of access to higher education** and the setting up of **a comprehensive qualifications framework** have both become top-priority tasks in the overall human resources development strategy of Hong Kong.

1.2 Recent Development

In response to the government's call to widen access to tertiary education, several tertiary institutions such as the continuing education divisions of The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) launched a new type of programme called the Associate Degree (AD) programme in the Autumn semester of 2000. City University of Hong Kong (CityU) also converted its Higher Diploma programmes into AD programmes. Loosely based on the North American Associate Degree model, graduates of the programme are in general expected to articulate to the second year of the local or overseas (British-style) 3-year university curriculum, or to the third year of the overseas (American-style) 4-year university curriculum.

Apart from HKU SPACE (School of Professional and Continuing Education) which operates a 3-year AD programme and accepts S.5 graduates (with a minimum of 6 passes, including English or Chinese) into their first year, the AD programmes offered by the other institutions have a 2-year curriculum and would accept only S.6/S.7 students. (HKU SPACE also accepts S.6/S.7 students into the second year of their programmes.)

The response to this new type of programme was overwhelming. In one of the offering institutions, thousands of applicants competed for several hundred places. In view of this huge demand, all the other UGC-funded institutions of the Federation also plan to offer AD or equivalent programmes in the Autumn semester of 2001.

As AD is a totally new academic qualification in Hong Kong, there is an urgent need to clarify and ascertain its status and role in the overall education framework of Hong Kong, both for academic articulation as well as employment purposes. In particular, it is important that all relevant institutions should adopt a set of common descriptors for the programme. This will lend credibility to the claim that AD is a proper and valuable addition to the academic qualifications in Hong Kong.

1.3 The Present Study

Commissioned by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) in January 2001, the present study is undertaken by The Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions (hereinafter called the Federation or FCE) during the period from February to May 2001. The Project Objectives are as follows:

(a) to propose a **common descriptor** of AD or equivalent, having regard to entry requirements, programme structure, curriculum, duration and exit qualifications etc.;

(b) identify all existing local programmes which fit the descriptor;

(c) build up a repository of information on local and overseas AD programmes;

(d) identify problems that need to be resolved if AD is to be incorporated into a comprehensive **qualifications framework** to be developed in the future; and

(e) map out the progression and articulation routes for courses leading to AD or equivalent.

FCE submitted an Interim Report to EMB in March. Comments were received from relevant parties, and the major comments are incorporated in this Final Report. The Report was submitted to EMB in early June 2001.

The present study achieves the following objectives:

(a) outlines the key features of Associate Degree programmes offered in other places and highlights the application in the Hong Kong context;

(b) takes stock of the AD programmes being offered and to be launched in Hong Kong;

(c) recommends a common descriptor of AD for Hong Kong having regard to the international experience and local circumstances; and

(d) acts as a catalyst for FCE, major providers of AD programmes, to reach a consensus on a common descriptor of AD in Hong Kong.

Chapter 2: Associate Degree in Other Regions

2.1 Overview and Key Lessons for Hong Kong

Having conducted a general overview of overseas experience in offering AD programmes, we have the following general observations:

(a) AD grows out from the development of community colleges in the USA in the 19th century, and was later adopted and adapted in some parts of Canada after the Second World War. AD has recently been introduced in Taiwan. Other than North America, Taiwan and perhaps some areas heavily influenced by the States, AD programmes are seldom offered in other countries.

(b) Higher diplomas and diplomas are the most common sub-degree level qualifications in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth higher education system. UK is pioneering a Foundation Degree programme, which is a two-year post-Advanced Level qualification with a strong vocational orientation.

(c) There are few, if any, places with the co-existence of AD and Higher Diploma/Diploma programmes.

(d) There is no international, national or state common descriptor of an AD, though institutions generally follow some common practices and recommendations of national or regional associations such as the American Association of Community Colleges in USA, and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges in Canada.

(e) The meaning of AD has evolved over the years. While it is reckoned that a common descriptor is required for the case of Hong Kong (similar to what has been done by the British Columbia Council in Canada; see Section 2.3 below), we need to keep an open mind to allow AD to evolve in the light of changing circumstances.

The following sections provide more detailed information on the AD programmes currently offered in various countries/regions.

2.2 The U.S. Community College Movement

AD award is a product of the development of community colleges in the United States of America. The history of the community colleges is well chronicled by authors such as Vaughan (1999) and Cohen & Brawer (1996). In short, they started out as "junior colleges" at the beginning of the twentieth century, which in turn were based on the 2-year "church colleges" made possible by the Land Grant Acts (Morrill Act) of 1862 and 1890. The first junior college in the United States was established at around 1901. After a period of relatively slow development, a major boost was received in 1947 with the release of the Truman Commission Report on Higher Education, and the comprehensive community college as we know it today began to flourish in the early sixties. (Cain, 1999, p.9)

So what is the function of a community college? A succinct description is given as follows:

> Community colleges are public institutions of higher education. They are characterised by a **two-year** curriculum that leads to either the associate degree or transfer to a four-year college. The transfer program parallels the first two years of a four-year college. The degree program generally prepares students for direct entrance into an occupation. Because of their low tuition fee, local setting, and relatively easy entrance requirements, community colleges have been a major force in the post-World War II expansion of educational opportunities in the United States. They are also referred to as junior colleges. (*The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition, Copyright 2000, Columbia University Press)

As can be seen, AD lies at the core of the community college curriculum. This is affirmed in the latest Policy Statement announced by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC):

> The associate degree program is affirmed as central to the mission of the community college..... Awarding the associate degree is a way by which an institution indicates that the student has completed a program of academic development and has achieved a level of performance reflected in student learning outcomes sufficient to move on to upper division collegiate work or to enter directly into specific occupations in the workplace. (AACC Policy Statement , August 1998, http://www.aacc.nche.edu/about/policy statements/associatedegree.htm)

While traditionally seen by many as peripheral to the mainstream higher education system, the advent of the knowledge society and the growing demand on higher education have changed people's perception as to the social importance of the associate degree:

> A number of forces are aligning to catapult community colleges to the center of federal and states educational agendas. Among these forces is the rapidly globalizing economy, with its insatiable demand for information and technical education, the largest factor for expansion of the higher education system since the 1970s (Adelman, 1999). Other forces include *shrinking public resources* to support higher education and *public demands for accountability and quality*. President Bill Clinton gave great impetus toward shifting community college policy to the center when he stated that *at least 80 percent of adults should attain at least an associate degree*. (Townsend and Twombly, 2001, p.x) [italics added]

There is no doubt that the community college has become a major player in the higher education scene of the United States. At present, there are around 1,200 community colleges in the country. About 87% of them are publicly-funded, and 13% are privately operated. The latest statistics show that **approximately 44% of all undergraduates in the States are studying in community colleges**. In most state universities, the number of first and second year students together amounts to only 40% of the total number of students in the third and fourth year. The remaining 60% are students from community colleges who go directly into the third year via various transfer programmes. (Note that in the American system, students who choose to

transfer to the formal university curriculum will not be awarded an associate degree.) (http://www.aacc.nche.edu)

However, it has to be pointed out that AD is not the only qualification awarded by the community colleges. Since the colleges run on a fully credit-based system, students can exit with qualifications at various levels of academic attainment. What is more, the colleges also offer various kinds of compensatory, remedial and life-wide learning courses, as well as courses for the elderly ("third-age learning").

In terms of curriculum contents, courses offered by the American community colleges can range from **broad-based liberal studies** to **highly vocational subjects**.

2.3 The Associate Degree in Canada

Due to its proximity to the United States, community colleges have also flourished in Canada in the past half century. The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) has currently over 150 member institutions over the country (http://www.accc.ca).

In 2000, the British Columbia Council adopted a set of "Requirements for the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science Degrees". While each community college - be it in the US or in Canada - may have its own set of mission statements and objectives, this set of requirements serves as a good model reference for what is expected from the completion of an AD education:

> "The associate degree is designed to provide an educational experience that prepares students for work, citizenship and an enriched life as an educated person, and to lay a solid foundation for further study.... Students will be exposed to concepts, theories and modes of inquiry in the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences to develop:
>
> - An interest in and curiosity about the world around them;
> - An understanding of the global context in which they live and work;

- An appreciation of intellectual thought and human creativity;
- An openness to a variety of viewpoints;
- A capacity for and interest in self-directed life-long learning; and
- Acceptance for the social responsibilities that come with the benefits of advanced learning.

In addition, the program of study should develop and improve skills and abilities essential for academic success at an advanced intellectual level... They include but are not limited to :

- Advanced reading and comprehension;
- Effective written and oral communications;
- Mathematical and scientific reasoning;
- Computer and technological literacy;
- Research and evaluative skills;
- Analysis, synthesis, and integration of knowledge;
- Critical thinking and problem solving.
- Application of theoretical understanding to practice; and
- Working collaboratively."

As can be seen, the objectives and ideals of AD programme are in fact not far from those of a full university education.

2.4 Recent Development in the United Kingdom

In July 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir (now Lord) Ron Dearing released its final report (often called the Dearing Report) on the long-term strategic development of higher education in the U.K. The main theme of the report is *increasing participation* and the *widening of access to higher education*.

In response to this call for widening access, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) came up with the Foundation Degree proposal in 2000. The proposal calls for the phasing out of the higher national diplomas, to be replaced by the Foundation degrees. Although the Foundation degree is in many aspects similar to the Associate Degree, the latter name is not used, probably as a deliberate attempt "to provide differentiation from the American Associate Degree". (Clubb & Corrigan, 2001)

In a paper titled "Foundation Degrees: A Consultative Document" released by the UK government in February 2000, the rationale for introducing this new type of degree was given as follows:

> Foundation Degrees will raise the value of vocational and technical qualifications, making them an attractive first choice for many students. A two year route to a degree with high market value because of its focus on employability will offer a new option for people, both young and mature, *who do not feel that a traditional, three year honours degree is right for them*. It will create more opportunities for people to improve their qualifications whilst balancing their other commitments. And it will add a new character to the higher education system of which we are already justly proud. The Foundation Degree will help to maximise the potential of our people and bolster our workforce ready to compete in the toughest of global markets. [italics added]

In July 2000, a Foundation Degree Prospectus was released inviting bids for the first prototype courses. In the prospectus, the intention of the government was clearly stated: "The Government envisages that a significant proportion of the future resource available to expand HE will be focused on foundation degrees." (Executive Summary, *Foundation Degree Prospectus*)

The first Foundation Degree programme will be offered in Autumn 2001.

2.5 Recent Developments in the Mainland and Taiwan

Following the release of the Higher Education Ordinance in 1995 and the Vocational Education Ordinance in 1996, the first community college in Mainland China was established (converted from an old vocational school) in the Chaoyang district of Beijing in 1999. Since then, this type of colleges has proliferated in the major cities of China. Although the name "Associate Degree" is not used, many programmes lead to an exit qualification which is roughly equivalent to AD in the North American model.

Also in 1999, the "Regulations on the Establishment of Community Colleges" were put forward by the Executive Council of Taiwan. The regulations allow for the award of AD by officially recognised community colleges. AD holders could articulate to the third year of the formal university curriculum.

2.6 Summary

From the brief survey above, it can be seen that Hong Kong is not alone in its attempt to re-structure its higher education system. Similar reforms are taking place in other regions. The driving forces are similar: fierce competition resulting from a globalising economy, shrinking public resources to support higher education, and public demands for accountability and quality (Towsend and Twombly, 2001).

And in many cases, AD is at the heart of such reforms. In the case of Hong Kong, the course of development is characterised by the fact that taking their cues from the Education Commission's consultative documents, local tertiary institutions have ventured to offer AD programmes ahead of any government policy formulation. Before recommendations on such formulation can be made, therefore, it is necessary to take stock of the relevant programmes which are currently offered. It is to this task we now turn.

Chapter 3: Programmes currently offered in Hong Kong

3.1 Summary of Key Findings

As part of the consultancy study, a stock-taking exercise was carried out among members of the FCE in March/April 2001. A proforma was designed (see Appendix) and sent out to all members to collect information on programmes offered - or planned to be launched in Autumn 2001 - which would lead to the Associate Degree (and the Higher Diploma). Summaries of the results (***as at early May 2001***) are given in Tables 1 to 6 below. The key findings are:

(a) AD was first launched in Hong Kong in Autumn 2000.

(b) CityU, HKBU and HKU SPACE are the pioneers. HKBU and HKU SPACE launched AD on a self-financing basis. The focus is broad-based education, with articulation arrangements mainly to non-local universities. CityU converted the UGC-funded Higher Diploma programmes to AD programmes.

(c) Starting from the academic year 2001/02, the number of providers will increase significantly, as all other UGC-funded members of the FCE will launch AD programmes. It is also reckoned that there will be new entrants who are non-FCE members.

(d) At present, there is no common descriptor for AD in Hong Kong. This study has facilitated FCE in reaching consensus on a common descriptor in terms of programme structure, entrance requirements, teachers' qualifications, etc.

3.2 The Associate Degree Programmes

For Academic Year 2000-01

From the summary, it can be seen that AD programmes are currently offered by three institutions:

City University of Hong Kong - with 15 two-year full-time programmes and 10 three-year *part-time* programmes. These are all converted from existing UGC-funded Higher Diploma (HD) promrammes.

Hong Kong Baptist University - with 1 two-year full-time programme and a total intake of 300 students.

The University of Hong Kong - with 1 (initially undifferentiated) three-year full-time programme. (This will be differentiated into 4 programmes in 2001/02.)

Details are tabulated below for easy comparison:

Table 1

	No. of Programmes			No. of Student Intake
	Full-time	**Part-time**	**Total**	
CityU	15	10	25	1,961
HKBU	2		2	300
HKU	4		4	740
Total	21	10	31	3,201

For Academic Year 2001-02

The proforma returns indicate that there will be more providers, programmes and places.

Table 2

	No. of Programmes			No. of Student Intake
	Full-time	**Part-time**	**Total**	
Provision by new entrants				
CUHK	1		1	150
HKIEd	1		1	120
HKUST	1	1	2	200
LU	1		1	150
OUHK	1	1	2	No upper limit
PolyU	1		1	120
Sub-total	6	2	8	740+

Key: CUHK- The Chinese University of Hong Kong

HKIED- The Hong Kong Institute of Education

HKUST- The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

LU- Lingnan University

OUHK- The Open University of Hong Kong

PolyU-The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Table 3

	No. of Programmes			No. of Student Intake
	Full-time	**Part-time**	**Total**	
Provision by existing providers				
CityU	18	9	27	2,412
HKBU	2		2	600
HKU	4		4	1,340
Sub-total	21	9	31	4,352
Grand total	**27**	**11**	**39**	**5,092**

In summary, starting from the Autumn semester of 2001, all universities in Hong Kong will be offering Associate Degree programmes.

(Note: While most programmes offered by CityU, HKBU and HKU in 2000-01 will continue in 2001-02, it is noted that some of the programmes offered by CityU - all of which have been converted from former Higher Diploma programmes - will be discontinued starting 2001.)

It should be noted that all the two-year full-time programmes would only accept students who have completed S.6 or S.7. The three-year full-time programme of The University of Hong Kong would accept S.5 graduates with six passes (including Chinese or English). However, it also accepts students directly into the second year of their programme, and the entry requirement is the completion of S.7 studies.

It was also found that the programmes offered by the different institutions vary quite widely in terms of entry requirements and total contact hours. In terms of entry requirements, apart from the open examination results, the age limits of mature applicants range from a minimum of 17

for the Open University to a high of 25 for the City University. In terms of contact hours, the range is even larger, ranging from a low of 200 hours to a high of 1,092 hours. (The highest figure is in fact 1,620 for the HKU programme. However, since it is a three-year programme accepting S.5 students, a more appropriate comparison is to use the total hours of its last two years. The figure is 1,080 hours, just below the figure of some of the CityU programmes.)

3.3 The Higher Diploma Programmes

As an academic qualification which is closest to AD, the present study also looks at the Higher Diploma (HD) programmes in Hong Kong. The proforma survey supplies the following information for **the academic year 2000/01**.

Table 4

	Duration	**No. of Programmes**			**No. of Students**
	Year	**Full-time**	**Part-time**	**Total**	
Caritas	4	4		4	594
CUHK	4½		1	1	10
PolyU	2	16		16	1,462
	3	1 (sandwich)	3	4	416
	5		1	1	60
VTC	3	2			1,600

Key: VTC- Vocational Training Council

For the **Academic Year 2001/02**, the following **new** programmes will be launched:

Table 5

	Duration	**No. of Programme**			**No. of Student**
	Year	**Full-time**	**Part-time**	**Total**	
HKU	3	6		6	610
OUHK	3		1	1	no upper limit
PolyU	2	7		7	329
	2.5	4		4	115
	3	3 (sandwich)	1	4	156
	4		2	2	70
VTC	3	2		2	1,600

As with AD programmes, the HD programmes also vary widely in terms of entry requirements and total contact hours. In particular, the latter ranges from a low of 200 hours for a three-year part-time distance learning programme of the Open University, to a high of 2,760 hours for a four-year full-time programme of the Caritas Adult and Higher Education Service.

3.4 Summary

The AD programmes in Hong Kong were launched in response to the Education Commission's call to build a more flexible and diversified higher education system in Hong Kong. However, such programmes were designed and launched separately by various tertiary institutions with **no overall coordination and planning**. While all providers so far are self-accrediting, statutory bodies, and their academic autonomy should be respected, it is obvious that from the standpoint of the employers and the public at large, there is an urgent need for **a set of common descriptors** of AD that applies across all institutions. This would enable the various stakeholders - including students, parents, universities and employers - to have a clear idea of the meaning and position of AD in Hong Kong's education framework. In addition, it would contribute to the setting up of government guidelines to be followed by future providers.

The development of such a set of common descriptors is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 4: The Associate Degree Programme in Hong Kong — Common Descriptors

4.1 Rationale and Programme Objectives

The following reasons for the establishment of the Associate Degree (AD) programme are identified:

(a) In the past, the basic definition of higher education is a university degree or a vocationally oriented higher diploma or diploma. To develop a more **diversified higher education structure**, AD provides another alternative for many students who do not feel that a traditional, three year honours degree or a vocationally oriented higher diploma is right for them. It will add a new character to the higher education system. Through the Associate Degree programmes, the students can find out more about their own interests, aptitudes, strength as well as aspirations, and choose to start their career or to further their studies accordingly. This would allow for more flexibility and lead to a saving of social resources.

(b) As Hong Kong moves towards a high-technology and knowledge-based economy, there is an urgent need for a larger percentage of the work force to have an educational level that is above and beyond the basic secondary school education. The traditional S.6 and S.7 matriculation programme is deemed to be not up to the task, not only because of the limitation of places, but because the curriculum is too narrowly focussed. By emphasising a mixture of **broad-based education** plus **practical specialisms**, AD programme can open up access to higher education and at the same time contribute to the upgrading of the human capital of Hong Kong in a way that can meet the requirements of the new era.

Mission objectives of the AD programmes currently offered or being planned by Members of the Federation are collected and reviewed. The following **common descriptors** are proposed:

In general

(a) to provide enriching education at post-secondary and sub-degree level that prepares the students for work, leisure, further study and active citizenship;

In particular

(b) to help students to understand better their interests, inclinations and aptitudes, and to provide them with a diversity of options both in terms of further studies and career development;

(c) to develop a solid foundation of generic skills, including languages, IT, interpersonal, communication, quantitative and analytical skills, etc;

(d) to equip learners with specialised knowledge and skills to meet the manpower requirements of the increasingly knowledge-based economy of Hong Kong;

(e) to prepare students for further studies in various subject areas; and

(f) to promote whole person development by broadening the learners' perspectives, cultivating their appreciation of cultural and ethical values, fostering their sense of social responsibility, enhancing their creativity and innovativeness, and instilling the spirit of lifelong learning.

The above objectives are very much in line with the Aims of Education for higher education as listed by the Education Commission in their Final Report (ref. Section 4.5, p. 32).

4.2 Entry Requirements

The proposed minimum entry requirements of the AD programme are as follows:

(a) **Satisfactory completion of S.6, plus 5 passes in HKCEE, including Chinese and English, OR**

(b) **Satisfactory completion of a Pre-AD programme, OR**

(c) **Aged 21 or above.**

4.3 Programme Structure

The AD programme could be offered either in a full-time mode or part-time mode. As a full-time programme, it should have **a 2-year curriculum**, with **not less than 450 contact hours per year**. Based on the formula of "one credit point equals 15 contact hours", this translates into a minimum of **30 credit points per year**.

Nominally, a 2-semester academic year would mean that each semester would consist of 15 weeks (14 teaching weeks plus one week for examination), with each week consisting of 15 contact hours. However, it is suggested that each programme provider could be given the freedom to come up with their own programme structure, as long as the total number of contact hours is not less than 450 hours.

4.4 Curriculum Design

With reference to the programme objectives stated in Section 4.1 above, it is clear that the Associate Degree curriculum should include a substantial amount of generic skills and broadening contents. Taking the two years together, it is recommended that the proportion of these non-specialsim contents should constitute **not less than 20%** of the total curriculum. This relatively low figure is to cater for those programmes which have to articulate to very specialised professional studies in the universities (e.g. biomedical sciences, architectural studies, legal studies etc.). For other less specialised disciplines, the proportion should in general be substantially higher, say, up to 40%.

It is also understood that normally, this percentage will be higher in the first year, and lower in the second year.

As a guideline, the non-specialist contents should include:

For generic skills

- English
- Chinese
- Putonghua
- Quantitative skills
- Basic IT skills
- Communication/Interpersonal skills
- Analytic and problem-solving skills

For broadening contents

- **The Arts and Humanities** - an appreciation of our creative impulse and achievements throughout the ages; a basic understanding of the history of our civilisation.
- **The Sciences and Technology** - an appreciation of our endeavours and achievements in understanding the nature of the universe; a basic understanding of the knowledge-base of our technological civilisation.
- **The Human Sciences** - an overall perspective in the nature and history of human societies; a basic understanding of the different domains of human behaviour through disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, politics etc.
- **Ways of Knowing** - an appreciation of the nature of philosophical inquiry; a basic understanding of cognitive science and how we come to know what we know; basic training in logical and critical thinking.

- **Values Education** - an appreciation of the values of different cultures; learning to respect other people's rights and values; building up one's own personal and social values.

It can be seen that the above non-specialist contents are in fact the core strength of the AD programme. In this increasingly globalised and knowledge-based society, an AD programme with a substantial proportion of these contents would prepare the students for life and work in the modern world much better than the traditional S.6/7 curriculum plus the first year of university study.

Ideally, a major proportion (say, up to 50%) of the AD curriculum should be made up of these contents. In practice, however, as the programmes have to articulate to many of the traditional and specialised university curriculum, the specialism contents required for articulation preclude the inclusion of too much generic/broadening contents in the AD programmes. If the university curricula (and the whole university education paradigm) are to be revamped, however, the AD programmes will be ready.

(Taking into account the Pre-AD Programme curriculum to be discussed in the next chapter, a general recommendation is that among the non-specialist contents, more emphasis may be placed on the generic skills in the Pre-AD year, and relatively more emphasis should be placed on the broadening contents in the AD curriculum.)

4.5 Learning Outcomes

Broadly speaking, Associate Degree graduates should possess a solid foundation of generic skills, including Chinese and English languages, basic IT applications, interpersonal, communications, quantitative and analytic skills etc. which is sufficient for them to perform in the modern, knowledge-based working environment. In addition, they should possess the knowledge and skills in a specialised domain which are sufficient for them to perform effectively at **associate professional level**, or to further their studies in universities or through professional development programmes.

With regard to a set of more detailed descriptors, a review was made on the Qualifications Descriptors as proposed in an earlier consultancy study commissioned by EMB and undertaken by the Vocational Training Council (Sensicle, 2000). Reference was also made to the descriptors published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the United Kingdom and the Australian Qualifications Advisory Board (see References at the end of the report for details). The following descriptors are proposed.

Knowledge and concepts - basic understanding of a broad range of knowledge, including the theoretical concepts in some areas; the understanding of one or more disciplines of specialised knowledge, with substantial depth in certain areas. In particular, the student should

- understand the nature and scope of the main area(s) of study, and its interaction with related subjects;
- be familiar with the essential concepts, theories, principles and terminology of the main area of study; and
- be aware of current issues in relation to the main area of study, including their possible social and ethical implications.

Skills/Competency

- the acquisition of a range of generic skills to work efficiently in a modern working environment;
- the ability in the gathering, processing, critical analyses and presentation of both quantitative and qualitative information in the core area of study;
- can work effectively with others as a member of a team; and
- be able to identify their major learning needs, and undertake steps to address them with appropriate support.

Applications

- can apply given tools/methods effectively to solve a variety of well-defined problems;
- can apply their knowledge and imagination to propose solutions to less well-defined problems; and
- can apply their knowledge and analytical power to form informed - but undogmatic - judgements on complex issues based on expert opinions.

From the perspective of broad-based education and whole-person development, learning outcomes should also include the objectives of the broadening subjects as listed in Section 5.4 above:

- An appreciation of our creative impulse and achievements throughout the ages; a basic understanding of the history of our civilisation.
- An appreciation of our endeavours and achievements in understanding the nature of the universe; a basic understanding of the knowledge-base of our technological civilisation.
- An overall perspective in the nature and history of human societies; a basic understanding of the different domains of human behaviour through disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, politics, etc.
- An appreciation of the nature of philosophical inquiry; a basic understanding of cognitive science and how we come to know what we know; basic training in logical and critical thinking.
- An appreciation of the values of different cultures; learning to respect other people's rights and values; building up one's own personal and social values.

4.6 Teacher Qualifications

It is recommended that the minimum teacher qualifications for AD programmes should be

> **"at least 70% of all lecturing staff (full-time plus part-time) should possess a Master's degree or equivalent, and should have a minimum of two years' teaching experience in the relevant field, or equivalent working experience."**

In practice, it is envisaged that many of the teachers recruited would have an even higher qualification, such as a doctoral degree.

4.7 Quality Assurance

To ensure the quality of the AD programmes, providers should establish a set of **rigorous quality assurance procedures** for the **design**, **implementation** and **evaluation** of the programmes. For self-accrediting tertiary institutions, these procedures should follow those adopted for the quality assurance of **publicly-funded degree programmes**.

For members of the FCE having self-accrediting status, the AD programmes have all been endorsed by the Senate of each respective institution. In addition, by agreeing in principle to accept AD graduates into the second year of the 3-year Bachelor degree curriculum, the Senate has effectively **recognised the academic attainment level of the Associate Degree as equivalent to the completion of the first year of local university studies**.

For providers who do not have self-accrediting status, the quality assurance of the AD programmes would have to involve the participation of external agencies. While the detailed arrangements for such external accreditation/validation is outside the ambit of the present study, a recommendation is that such arrangements should have a fair degree of consistency across institutions.

4.8 Student Counselling

As the AD programme is one during which the students are to find out more about their interests, inclinations, abilities, potentials and aspirations etc., it is important that student counselling service be provided to help the students to design their own study pathways and/or future career plans.

Needless to say, a professional and high-quality counselling service is also vital for the whole person development of the students.

4.9 Exit Qualifications

The exit qualification of the AD graduates is pitched at a level in between the current matriculants and degree holders. According to the North American model, an AD award is equivalent to 50% of a 4-year university degree. In the context of present-day Hong Kong, however, it is only considered as equivalent to one third of a 3-year university degree.

A most important issue crucial to the success of the Associate Degree programmes in Hong Kong is of course the acceptance of this qualification by the society at large. This acceptance can be broken down into four aspects:

(a) Acceptance by the parents and students;

(b) Acceptance by the employers;

(c) Acceptance by the government; and

(d) Acceptance by academia.

AD programmes had already been launched commencing the Autumn semester of last year (2000). The degree of acceptance by the parents and students was demonstrated by the overwhelming number of applications received. As an example, a total of more than 6,500 applications were received by the School of Professional and Continuing Education. The

University of Hong Kong, competing for 640 planned places. Subsequently, 740 students were accepted.

Needless to say, the above positive response is based on the perceived value of the Associate Degree rather than the demonstrated value of the qualification, as there are as yet no graduates of the programme, and hence no way to assess the quality of these graduates. Still, this response demonstrates the huge demand for higher education among the younger generation in Hong Kong.

In a telephone survey conducted in February 2001, a totai of 1,040 respondents of age 18 or above were asked about the qualification they would be looking for in case they were to take up continuing education courses in the coming 12 months. A full 9.4 % of the respondents said that they would like to attend courses leading to the Associate Degree. (*SPACE News*, Issue No.7)

As for the acceptance by the employers, this is still an unknown variable. One thing which is more certain is that their degree of acceptance will depend very much on the acceptance shown by the largest employer in Hong Kong, namely, the government.

In view of this, it is recommended that the government should take the lead in recognising the Associate Degree award by

(a) announcing a range/level of government posts for which the AD graduates are eligible to apply, and

(b) stipulating an entry salary point in the Master Pay Scale which is somewhere between the existing entry points for matriculants and degree holders (possibly the same as for current Higher Diploma holders; see Section 4.11 below).

As for the acceptance by academia at the present stage (i.e. before the appearance of the first batch of graduates), this can only be achieved by presenting to them the details of the programme structure, curriculum, and quality assurance mechanisms adopted. Considerable progress has been made by the current programme providers in this respect. More details are given in the section below.

4.10 Progression and Articulation Routes

The Associate Degree is designed as a programme with **multiple entry and exit points**. The multiple entry aspect is covered by the section on entry requirements above. As for the multiple exits, the articulation paths are as follows:

Completion of the first year of the programme should enable the students to articulate to

- Year two of the North American universities, or
- Year one of local or British universities, or
- Local/overseas professional programmes

Completion of the second year of the programme should enable students to articulate to

- Year three of North American universities, or
- Year two of local or British universities, or
- Local/overseas professional programmes.

Articulation routes to the university curricula are shown in Figure 1 (see Section 5.6 below).

It must be pointed out that the routes described are articulation-in-principle only. The actual articulation to a certain degree programme at a certain university is something which has to be worked out by the AD programme provider on a case-by-case basis. As mentioned earlier, considerable success in such arrangements have been made by the current providers. However, the general observation is that it is much harder to articulate to programmes of the local universities (with the exception of OUHK) than to programmes of overseas universities. This is largely due to the rigid structure and funding practice of university education in Hong Kong.

4.11 The Higher Diploma Programmes

Figure 1 on p.39 includes a progression route whereby S.5 school leavers can undertake a 3-year full-time programme (4 years for Caritas) and obtain an award called the Higher Diploma (HD). The fact is that long before the launching of the Associate Degree programmes in 2000, several institutions in Hong Kong (including CityU, VTC and Caritas) have been offering this type of full-time programme to post-secondary students.

Originally designated as a terminal award for vocational purposes, holders of the HD award are meant to serve in the community at the more technical level. The award has been recognised by government for employment and regulatory purposes (i.e. HD graduates can do certain tasks as prescribed in some legislation). The curriculum is frequently vocational or profession-specific, reflecting a specialist approach. Generally, less than 30% of the content is devoted to general studies. However, language and communication have been emphasised recently and typically account for more than 10% of the curriculum.

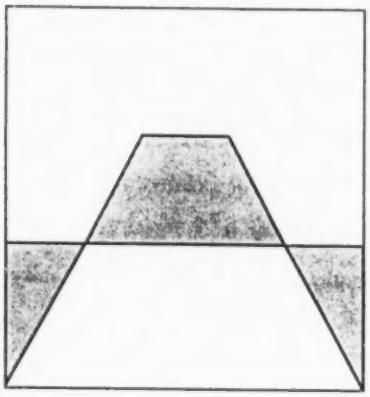
In recent years, there have been many top-up programmes available to bridge HDs to degree level, initially specialist British degrees and lately more generic degrees. Hence, HD can no longer be considered as a terminal award. Generic HDs have been offered recently by Caritas.

Functionally, HDs can be considered as an award which prepares students well for employment, can be used as a basis for top-up programmes, and can be used as a stepping stone to overseas degree programmes. There have also been isolated cases of HD holders being admitted to Year 2 of a local specialist degree.

However, it remains a fact that the status of the HD award has at times been somewhat confusing. This is because many of the HD programmes have different entry requirements, different number of contact hours, and even different durations (e.g. Caritas offers a 4-year HD programme). Some of them are partially funded by the UGC, while some are fully self-financing. They also have different validation and accreditation procedures. In order to develop a comprehensive qualifications framework, there is a need to rationalise the Higher Diploma award by developing a set of common descriptors, similar to that being done for the Associate Degree in the present

study.

While the development of a common descriptor for the Higher Diploma is outside the ambit of the present study, it is envisaged that a "rationalised" Higher Diploma would in many ways be roughly similar to the Associate Degree, except that it is more vocationally-oriented. The difference between the two awards is represented in the following diagram.



The formal university degree is represented by the overall rectangle, the Associate Degree is represented by the bottom half of the rectangle, and the HD is represented by the trapezoid. The difference between the two is represented by the grey parts.

Based on the above consideration, **it is recommended that the exit qualification of AD and HD programmes be considered comparable.** It is recommended that AD qualifications should be accepted for appointment to civil service posts for which the general entry requirement is set at HD. As regards grades which specify HD of a specific discipline as the basic entry requirements, the comparability of AD qualifications to that particular HD qualifications should be considered having regard to the detailed curriculum of the AD programme. It is also appreciated that the jobs open to the two qualifications may be somewhat different.

4.12 Anticipated Problems

Some problems in connection with the AD framework are:

(a) ***Articulation:*** On the one hand, the greatest selling point of the AD programme is the possible articulation to the formal university curriculum. On the other hand, it is inevitable that only a small percentage of the AD graduates would be able to achieve such articulation. In the United States, this percentage is less than 30% (Cohen, 1994). We are not aware of any system in the world that seeks to ensure that all post-secondary programmes are articulated to a full-time degree programme.

In the case of Hong Kong, AD will be designed as a programme with multiple-entry and multiple-exit. Like Higher Diploma, AD is a **standalone and valuable academic qualification on its own** for employment at the associate professional level. AD graduates may also further their studies or pursue professional development on a full-time or part-time basis. All the current AD programme providers have credit transfer, articulation and direct admission arrangements with many universities. Locally, the Open University of Hong Kong is ready to expand its capacity to admit associate degree graduates. In addition, many non-local institutions are offering part-time, top-up degree and professional programmes that target at sub-degree qualification holders.

As regards the University Grants Committee (UGC) sector, the articulation arrangements between sub-degree and degree programmes will need to be examined in greater detail in the context of the wider implementation of a credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) in Hong Kong. In the meantime, UGC-funded institutions should make full use of their wastage, which accounts for 590 undergraduate places (or 1.3%) in 1999/2000, to admit AD graduates to their second year degree studies. Institutions should exercise their flexibility to over-enrol by a certain margin without detriment to quality and offer more self-financing top-up degree programmes to meet rising demand by AD graduates.

(b) ***Availability of good teachers:*** A second problem is the possible lack of good teachers. With a large number of institutions launching the AD programmes in Hong Kong, the competition for good teachers will be fierce. The quality of the programmes will suffer if insufficient high-quality teachers can be recruited.

(c) ***AD and S.6:*** As AD programmes are open to students who have completed S.6, the increasing popularity of this type of programme may result in an increased drop-out rate of students in the midst of their matriculation studies. That said, AD can genuinely provide a useful channel which is alternative to the traditional S6/S7 study.

(d) ***AD and HD:*** Another problem lies with the relationship between AD and HD. As pointed out in Chapter 2, AD in the US can be both broad-based and vocational. As described in Section 4.11 above, HD in Hong Kong (as well as in UK and Commonwealth countries) is traditionally more vocation-oriented. However, there is also a trend that some HDs are becoming more broad-based.

There would be no problem in countries where only one type of qualification exists. For the case of Hong Kong, where both types of qualifications exist, there would be public confusion as to what is the exact difference between, say, a more vocation-oriented AD on the one hand, and a more broad-based HD on the other. If the difference is very small, the query would arise as to why we need two types of awards at all.

While the resolution of this problem is beyond the scope of the present study, it is recommended that the government should formulate and announce some clear guidelines on this so as to avoid public confusion.

Chapter 5: The Higher Education Foundation Certificate -- A Pre-Associate Degree Programme

5.1 Rationale for the Programme

To achieve the policy objective of increasing the participation rate in higher education, a prerequisite is to widen access and build bridges for secondary school leavers, particularly at the S.5 level. Currently, apart from those who choose - and have the ability - to study abroad, the main progression routes open to S.5 school leavers in Hong Kong are:

(a) S.6 and S.7 matriculation programme (places available for about one-third of S.5 school leavers);

(b) the full-time Certificate/Diploma/Higher Diploma programmes offered by institutions such as VTC and Caritas;

(c) the part-time programmes offered by the Open University Hong Kong, which may lead all the way to the award of an OUHK degree;

(d) the part-time programmes offered by the various Continuing Education (CE) providers in Hong Kong, some of which may lead to the award of an overseas degree (and a few to local degrees); and

(e) the first year of the 3-year AD programmes offered by The School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of The University of Hong Kong.

Apart from the OUHK programmes, entrance into the above programmes are in general highly competitive, and depend heavily on the results obtained in the HKCEE.

In addition to the OUHK programmes, another programme which accepts students with any results is the Springboard Programme. However, since the qualification obtained after completion of the Springboard Programme is only comparable to 5 passes in the HKCEE, it is in the strict sense not a progression route for S.5 graduates.

As described in Chapter 1 of this report, all AD programmes currently on offer - apart from the HKU one - are 2-year programmes accepting S.6/S.7 students. This means that *students who are unable to enter into the traditional matriculation programme are barred from taking up the AD programme*. This is in direct contradiction to the underpinning philosophy of the AD scheme to widen access to higher education.

For the present, as well as the immediate future, there is **an urgent need for an alternative or a "bridging/access programme"** via which S.5 school leavers can progress to the AD programme without going through the traditional matriculation route.

From the educational point of view, a much more broad-based "access programme" would also prepare the students for the AD programme much better than one year of S.6 study.

The title Higher Education Foundation Certificate (HEFC) is proposed, and would be used - sometimes interchangeably with the term Higher Education Foundation Programme, HEFP - from now onwards for this access programme.

This programme can be viewed as either a standalone programme or an integral part of a 3 year programme admitting Secondary 5 graduates and leading to an AD qualification. Similar arrangements are made for Higher Diploma programmes in Hong Kong.

(From the proforma returns, it is found that both Hong Kong Baptist University and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University are planning to launch a bridging programme for their AD programmes, with students intakes of 200 and 80 respectively. Since the HKU SPACE AD programmes have a 3-year curriculum accepting S.5 students, there will effectively be three institutions in Hong Kong offering programmes similar to the proposed HEFP starting from the Autumn semester of 2001.)

5.2 The Entry Requirements

While totally open access is an ideal to be pursued, practical constraints means that even a HEFC programme can accept only a small proportion of the potential applicants in the near future. As such, there still has to be a set of basic academic standards (based on HKCEE results) for enrolment purposes.

After extensive discussion among Members of the Federation, it was agreed that to achieve widened access and at the same time ensure student standard, a flexible approach should be adopted. In effect, students meeting a certain set of minimum criteria are eligible to apply for the HEFP. For students with academic results over and above a specified level, they would be exempted the first part of the programme (see Section 5.3 below).

The detailed minimum entry criteria are suggested as follows:

(a) Students with a minimum of 5 passes in the HKCEE, including Chinese and English, OR

(b) Springboard Programme graduates, OR

(c) Mature students of age 21 or above could be admitted irrespective of academic background.

With the above entry requirements, nearly all potential applicants are taken care of. Students with less than 5 passes in the HKCEE can always obtain access by going through the Springboard Programme, which has a totally open entry.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that the Open University will maintain its open entrance policy with respect to this proposed programme.

5.3 Programme Structure and Curriculum Design

It is proposed that the HEFC should be a **1-year full-time,** or 2-year part-time programme consisting of **not less than 650 contact hours**. For the full-time programmes, this would roughly translate into a teaching schedule of two semesters per year, with each semester consisting of 14 teaching weeks and 1 examination week. The contact hours per week will be about 23 hours. (Based on a commonly adopted definition of **1 credit unit equals 15 hours of tertiary level contact between lecturers/tutors and student per semester**, the study load of the HEFP is about **43 credit units**.)

While applicants meeting one of the minimum criteria as listed in the above section are eligible to apply for the programme, it is proposed that **students who have obtained a total of 10 points or above in a single attempt at the HKCEE could be exempted from the initial 150 hours (foundation stage) - or 10 credit units - of the HEFP.**

It is envisaged that two types of HEFC programmes may be launched. The first type will be a very broad-based programme preparing the students to progress to the less specialised Associate Degree programmes (e.g. Associate of Arts). The second type will be the more specialism-oriented programmes, preparing the students to progress to a specific, professionally-oriented Associate Degree programme (e.g. Associate Degree in Accounting).

In the first type of programmes, the main bulk of the curriculum will be made up of non-specialist contents. These would include

(a) **generic skills** such as language (Chinese, English, Putonghua), quantitative skills, basic IT skills, and communication/interpersonal skills; and

(b) **general education subjects** including arts and humanities, science and technology, and social studies etc.

In the second type of programmes, the major proportion of the curriculum will be in the subject of specialism. However, it is suggested that in order to qualify as a HEFC Programme, the non-specialist contents in such programmes (and in fact for all HEFPs) **should not constitute**

less than 20% of the curriculum.

It is envisaged that the HEFP can either be offered by institutions as a standalone programme, or has seamless progression to an Associate Degree programme. For programmes that have undergone proper quality assurance procedures (see Section 5.5 below), institutions should **mutually recognise** the qualification of these HEFP graduates, so that they can articulate from one institution to another.

5.4 Teacher Qualifications

It is suggested that to qualify as a HEFC Programme, **at least 70% of all lecturing staff (full-time plus part-time) should possess a Master's degree or equivalent, and should have a minimum of two years' teaching experience in the relevant field, or equivalent working experience.**

5.5 Quality Assurance

All courses/modules of the HEFC Programme should undergo a rigorous validation exercise to be undertaken by the institution concerned before they are launched. The quality of the programme should also be kept under constant monitoring and review. For tertiary institutions which have self-accrediting status, no other external validation should be required.

5.6 Exit Qualifications and Progression Routes

While the express purpose of the HEFC is to prepare the students for the Associate Degree Programme, it is important that the qualification obtained after the programme can also stand on its own. This is because in reality, not every HEFC graduate may be able to proceed to the Associate Degree studies.

It is recommended that for the purpose of employment, HEFC graduates should be considered by the government as equivalent to S.6 students or matriculants.

For academic progression, it is suggested that in addition to the Associate Degree programme, the HEFC graduates could also be able to articulate to the second year of the 3-year Higher Diploma programmes currently offered by some tertiary institutions. This would enhance the attractiveness of the programme, as it is reckoned that not all HEFC graduates who choose to continue their study may be able to progress to the Associate Degree programmes. (Please see Figure 1 on p.39)

For students who intend to study abroad, the HEFC would enable them - in conjunction with the meeting of the English language requirements - to articulate to the first year of university studies in the U.S.A.

In conjunction with the entry requirements for the AD Programme as described in Section 4.2 above, it can be seen that progression routes are made available to **all S.5 graduates**. The routes are:

(a) S.5 → S.6 → AD programme

(b) S.5 → HEFP → AD programme

(c) S.5 → Springboard Programme → HEFP → AD programme

A schematic diagram of the progression routes is given in Figure 1.

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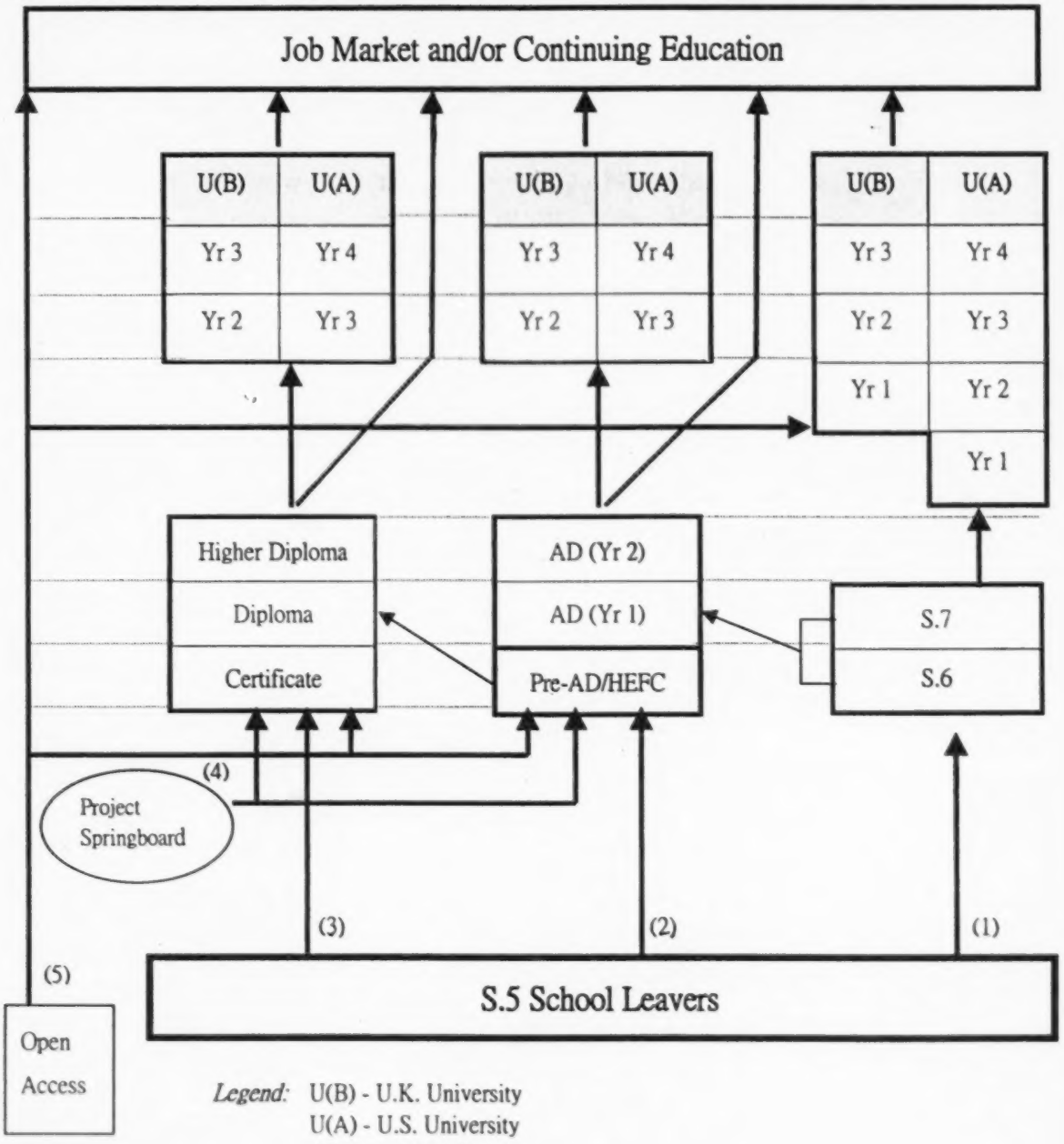
Figure One: **Progression Ladder of Associate Degree Programme**



Legend: U(B) - U.K. University
U(A) - U.S. University
AD - Associate Degree
HEFC - Higher Education Foundation Certificate

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5.7 Anticipated Problems

Many of the problems envisaged for the HEFC Programme are similar to those encountered by the Associate Degree programmes. Some of these problems are:

(a) Most potential providers of this new type of programme (e.g. most Members of the Federation) are only geared to the provision of part-time evening/weekend courses for mature, working adults. The teaching premises are mostly "town centres" converted from commercial venues, with no school facilities such as assembly halls, playgrounds, libraries, study rooms, canteens or sick bays etc. In short, there is little or **no campus life and pastoral care** offered to the students. This is fine as long as the students are working adults taking evening classes. For adolescents who have just finished their S.5 studies and attending classes in the day-time, this is a highly undesirable state of affairs.

(b) Another problem is the availability of qualified teachers. With a substantial number of institutions launching similar programmes, the competition for good teachers will be fierce. The quality of the programmes will suffer in case insufficient high-quality teachers can be recruited.

(c) On the articulation of the HEFC graduates to the existing Higher Diploma programmes, practical difficulties may arise. This is because many of the Higher Diploma programmes are highly vocational, and the HEFC curriculum may not have enough requisite specialism contents to articulate to the second year of these programmes. Such articulation may therefore be feasible only for a group of specialist HEFC programmes.

Chapter 6 Discussion and Recommendations

6.1 Credit Accumulation and Transfer

As pointed out at the beginning of this report, the **widening of access to higher education** and the setting up of a **comprehensive qualifications framework** have both become top-priority tasks in the overall human resources development strategy of Hong Kong. The introduction of the Associate Degree is an important step in our move to widen access, while the elucidation of the status of the Associate Degree in the education scene in Hong Kong - the objective of the present study - is an essential step in the formulation of a qualifications framework.

In line with the Education Commission's call for a more open, flexible and diversified higher education structure - the key component of which should be a "**flexible and transferable credit unit system**" - the Associate Degree should be designed as a **fully credit-based** programme. However, as a commonly agreed credit unit system is not yet in place across all institutions, the present study has continued to use "contact hours" as a basis for easy discussion and inter-comparison. The next important step following the present study would therefore be the setting up a commonly agreed credit unit system so as to facilitate **credit accumulation and transfer across institutions.**

6.2 The Regulatory Framework

Since tertiary institutions which have **self-accrediting status** are already governed by their specific government ordinances, the launching of Associate Degree programmes by such institutions - including their continuing and professional education (CPE) divisions - does not require any additional regulatory framework. For institutions which do not have such a status, however, the issue of legislation is one which has to be carefully addressed.

In a consultative paper titled "Proposed Regulatory Framework for Post-Secondary Education" issued in early 2001 by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), it is suggested that the following two sets of regulations be combined into a single piece of legislation:

- The relevant provisions in *Education Ordinance Cap. 279* for the regulation of registered schools authorised by Director of Education to offer post-secondary courses on a self-financing basis;

- *Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance Cap. 320* - for one approved post-secondary college, namely, Hong Kong Shue Yan College.

In the proposed **new regulatory framework** (mainly to replace Cap 320), it is further suggested that institutions offering post-secondary, sub-degree courses be divided into two main types:

- **Providers of Post-Secondary Courses** who must submit individual courses for registration and/or external accreditation; and

- **Post-Secondary Colleges** who may offer and validate sub-degree programmes by themselves.

However, to avoid *double regulation*, it is also proposed that a list of statutory bodies (as detailed in Schedule 1 of the EMB paper) be exempted from this regulatory framework, and that "post-secondary courses offered by the statutory educational institutions (be they self-accrediting or non-self-accrediting) will be deemed to be accredited courses." (Section 9(e), p.5)

The implication of all these is that in the future, Associate Degree programmes in Hong Kong may be offered by three types of institutions:

(a) Statutory institutions which are outside the (new) Regulatory Framework for Post-Secondary Education (as they are governed by their respective government ordinances);

(b) Institutions governed by the new framework, and are classified as "Providers of Post-Secondary Courses" i.e. external accreditation required for each individual programme; and

(c) Institutions governed by the framework, and are classified as "Post-Secondary College" i.e. no external accreditation of programmes required.

A full assessment of the implications of the above distinctions is beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice it to say that careful consideration must be given to the issue so as to avoid possible confusion and/or conflicts.

6.3 Key Recommendations

(a) The ensure that society at large understand fully the nature and meaning of the Associate Degree, and in particular its position and role in the current education system of Hong Kong, there is an urgent need for the education sector to adopt and announce **a set of common descriptors** for the Associate Degree progamme. These descriptors should include parameters at the **input end** such as entry requirements, contact hours, teachers' qualifications etc. It should also include parameters at the **output end** i.e. the learning outcomes. Tying all these together should be a comprehensive and detailed **quality assurance mechanism** to be implemented by the providers. All these would help to establish the Associate Degree as a legitimate addition to the academic qualifications framework in Hong Kong, and more important still, help to achieve its objective of contributing to the development of human capital in Hong Kong.

(b) As a starting point, the descriptions in Chapter 4 could be used as a model template for such a set of common descriptors. Consultation should then be carried out by the government with all stakeholders concerned, and the descriptors further refined and modified. The revised descriptors should then be **promulgated** for **reference by** (and possibly **regulation of**) current as well as would-be providers of AD programmes. (However, it could not be over-stressed that in this era of accelerating changes, we should keep an open mind and modify these descriptors in the light of changing circumstances.)

(c) To cater for providers **who do not have self-accrediting status**, there is a need for the

government to formulate a clear policy for the **accreditation and quality assurance** of the AD programmes to be offered.

(d) Subject to the above conditions being met, the government should **recognise the Associate Degree** by

- offering financial assistance to the AD students; and
- accepting AD qualifications for appointment to civil service grades which have general entry requirements at Higher Diploma level.

(e) As an access programme to the Associate Degree, the government should also recognise a **Higher Education Foundation Certificate** (HEFC) Programme. Students of this programme should be eligible to apply for student financial assistance.

(f) For benchmarking purposes, the government may also consider adopting a set of common descriptors for the HEFC programme.

(g) Concerted efforts should be made by tertiary institutions and the major course providers in the setting up a **credit accumulation and transfer system** for all AD (and possibly HEFC) programmes. This is especially important for students of part-time programmes.

The End

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2. "Learning for Life, Learning through Life - Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong", Education Commission, September 2000, HKSAR of PRC.

3. "Proposed Regulatory Framework for Post-Secondary Education". May 2001, Education and Manpower Bureau, HKSAR of PRC.

4. "The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland", The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2001.

5. "The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland", The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2001.

6. "Introduction to the AQF: Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees", Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board.

Internet Resource Links

American Association of Community Colleges - http://www.aacc.nche.edu

Association of Canadian Community Colleges - http://www.accc.ca

Community College Web - http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu

The Dearing Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education - http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe

International Baccalaureate Organisation - http://www.ibo.org

U.K. Foundation Degree, A Consultative Document - http://www.dfee.gov.uk/heqe/fdcd.htm

U.K. Foundation Degree Prospectus - http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2000/00_27.htm

U.K. Quality Assurance Agency - http://www.qaa.ac.uk

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Proforma for Programmes leading to the Associate Degree or Higher Diploma currently offered -- or being planned -- by Members of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions

Note: (1) Please use a separate form for each programme
(2) Please use an "x" to mark the correct answer if a box is provided

I	**Programme Title**	
II	**Mode of Study**	Full-Time ☐ Part-Time ☐
III	**Programme Structure**	
	1 Nominal years of study	
	2 Qualification obtained after 1 year of study	
	3 Qualification obtained after 2 years of study	
	4 Qualification obtained after 3 years of study	
	5 Qualification obtained after 4 years of study	
	6 No. of contact hours per year	Year 1 _____ Year 2 _____ Year 3 _____ Year 4 _____ Total
	7 No. of semesters per year	
	8 No. of teaching weeks per semester	
	9 No. of examination weeks per semester	
IV	**Entry Requirements**	
	1 Level	Springboard Programme ☐ F.5 ☐ F.6 ☐ F.7 ☐
	2 HKCEE results a Minimum no. of passes	
	b A pass in Chinese a must?	Yes ☐ No ☐ Either Chinese or English ☐
	c A pass in English (syllabus B) a must?	Yes ☐ No ☐ Either English or Chinese ☐
	d Minimum total no. of points	
	3 A-level results (if required)	
	4 Age limit for mature students (if applicable)	_____ or above

Proforma for Programmes leading to the Associate Degree or Higher Diploma currently offered – or being planned – by Members of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions

Note: (1) Please use a separate form for each programme
(2) Please use an "x" to mark the correct answer if a box is provided

V	**Teacher requirements** 1 Academic qualifications	
	2 Teaching experience	
VI	**Student-teacher ratio** 1 What is the average student-teacher ratio?	
	2 What is the average class size?	
VII	**Curriculum** 1 What is the rough proportion of curriculum contents between generic skills and specialism subjects?	Percentage of generic skills (in terms of contact hour) in the curriculum: _____% (generic skills include language, basic quantitative and IT skills, communication and interpersonal skills etc.) Other remarks: _____
	2 Are sports activities arranged for the student?	Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, what is the average number of hours : _____ per week, or _____ per semester
VIII	**Quality Assurance** Is there a standard mechanism for the internal validation of the programme and its modules?	Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, please describe briefly the mechanism in use
IX	**Routes of Progression and Articulation** (Please specify if the articulation is to local or overseas universities. Give a few concrete examples if possible.)	

Proforma for Programmes leading to the Associate Degree or Higher Diploma currently offered -- or being planned -- by Members of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions

Note: (1) Please use a separate form for each programme
(2) Please use an "x" to mark the correct answer if a box is provided

X	**Are student counselling services provided to the students?**	Yes ☐ No ☐
XI	**Student Intake**	
	1 For 2000-2001	
	2 For 2001-2002	
XII	**Fee Level (optional)**	
	2000 - 2001	
	1st year	
	2nd year	
	3rd year	
	4th year	
	2001-2002	
	1st year	
	2nd year	
	3rd year	
	4th year	

Thank you for your kind assistance!

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